

Daily Herald, June 10, 2008

Rosaura Acosta doesn't have any problems communicating with her four children.

But she knows as soon as they are old enough to attend school, her limited knowledge of English will pose a problem, particularly when it comes to helping them with homework.

Because of this, Acosta, who moved from Mexico to Round Lake Beach eight years ago, joined Families Involved in Reading Stories Together, or FIRST, a program to teach English to young Hispanic mothers so they can assist their sons and daughters with homework.

"Thank you for the program," Acosta said. "It is very good for my babies. It is very good for mothers too."

The program began in 2005 but was scaled back when funding was cut.

On Monday, Congressman Mark Kirk announced a \$335,043 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand FIRST.

"We want to say you are welcome here and we want your kids to succeed," Kirk said. "I hope this program will be a model for the United States."

Studies show nearly 30 percent of Hispanic students don't finish high school, compared with 8 percent of white students.

According to College of Lake County administrators, one critical reason for high dropout rates is

the lack of parent involvement in a child's education.

When FIRST was launched in 2005, sites were created at Round Lake Area Library, the Adult Learning and Technology Center in Waukegan, CLC's Lakeshore Campus in Waukegan and the Lake County Health Department in Wauconda.

The program ran about 18 months, with 397 parents and children served.

Funding was cut the following year, and a scaled-back version of the program has continued at CLC.

Mary Charuhas, dean of adult basic education, GED and ESL, said CLC was able to continue with 68 parents and grew the program to almost 100 parents.

With the new grant, Charuhas hopes to double the number of people served, and eventually return the program to the 400-parent level.

"Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers, so it's very important that they can read with their children in English," Charuhas said.

With the new grant, the program will be expanded to Waukegan, Mundelein, Round Lake and Wauconda beginning in August.

The FIRST program has five components: adult education, child education, parenting, parent and child together, or PACT, activities and library education.

Each week, parents are given a new children's book to read at home. Adults and children also learn how to use local libraries and computers, as well as develop literacy and social skills.

"The need for this program is very high, and we are thrilled to be able to resume it to its original scope and even expand it," Charuhas said.

#### FIRST at a glance

What: Families Involved in Reading Stories Together program

Purpose: Bringing Hispanic parents and children together to build reading skills. The program offers parents instruction in English as a Second Language and parenting skills, and the children age-appropriate activities to promote reading.

When: The expanded program begins in August.

For information: Call (847) 543-2021. A Spanish-speaking person will be available if necessary.